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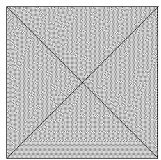
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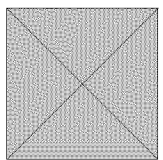
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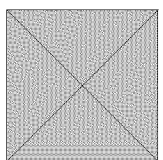
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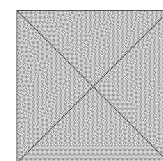
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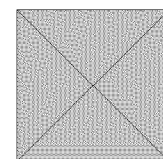
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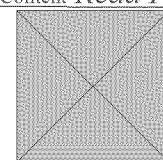
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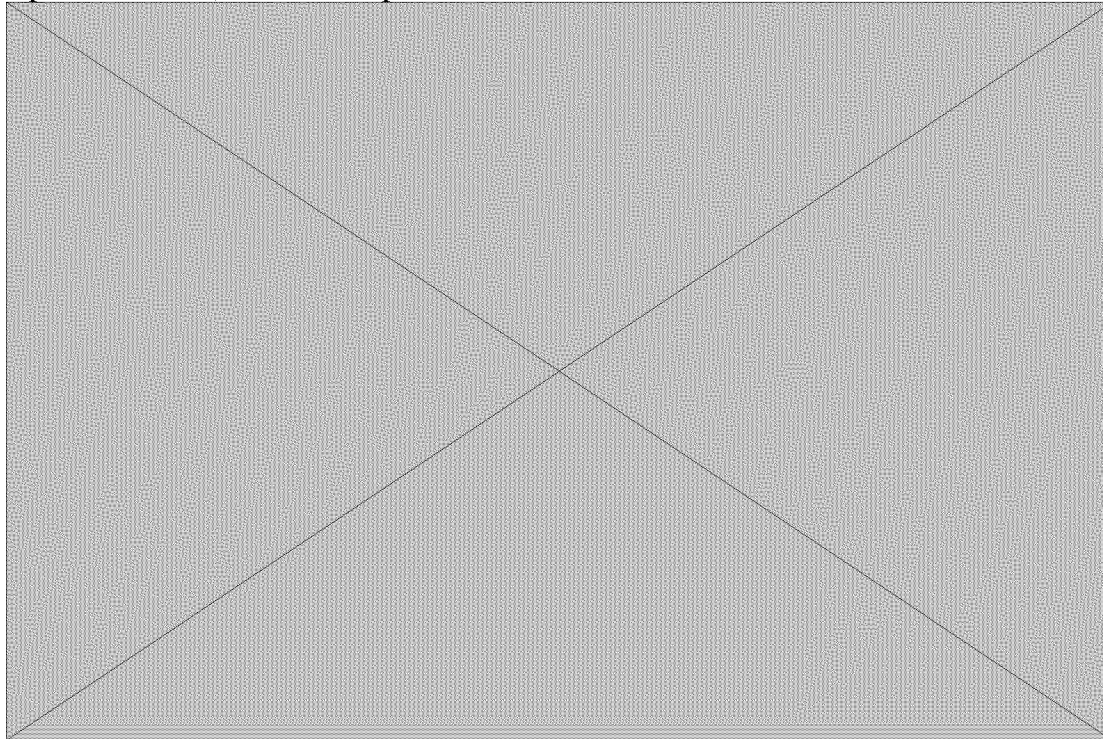
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Updated Jan. 11, 2014 12:11 p.m. ET



A man grabs the last few bottles of water at the Kroger in South Charleston, W.Va., following a chemical spill on the Elk River that compromised the public water supply. Tyler Evert/Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va.—Federal prosecutors launched an investigation Friday of a chemical spill that contaminated water supplies for several hundred thousand people and closed schools and businesses in the heart of the state.

Authorities don't know when the water will be safe for residents of the state capital and nine surrounding counties. A water ban went into effect Thursday after officials discovered that 4-methylcyclohexane methanol, used in coal processing, had leaked from a storage facility on the Elk River and seeped into a water-treatment plant.

President Barack Obama issued a federal disaster declaration for the state Friday and ordered aid be delivered there after a chemical spill contaminated the water supply for as many 300,000 people. Kris Maher reports on Lunch Break. Photo: AP/Charleston Daily Mail.

President [Barack Obama](#) issued a federal disaster declaration for the state Friday, and officials set up water-distribution centers. Authorities have reported no serious injuries. The chemical can cause skin rashes if touched and its vapors irritate eyes, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We have not faced a crisis like this before," Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin told a news conference in Charleston, where a thick licorice smell hung in the air.

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The spilled substance, known as MCHM, escaped from a 35,000-gallon storage tank belonging to specialty chemical-manufacturer Freedom Industries Inc., which was ordered to cease operations Friday. The leaked chemical breached a containment wall before flowing into the river, about a mile and a half upstream from the water-treatment facility.

Such major contaminations are relatively rare, experts said. Federal agencies have grown increasingly concerned about chemical storage since 15 people died last year from an explosion in West, Texas at a facility that housed fertilizer chemicals. The Obama administration has since convened a task force to examine ways to improve safety.

Chemical Spill Contaminates Water

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A stretch of the Elk River in Charleston, W.Va. Tyler Evert/Associated Press

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U.S. Attorney Booth Goodwin said his office has opened a criminal investigation of the spill. State and federal authorities want to know whether company officials knew the chemical was leaking and whether they failed to immediately report it as a hazardous spill—potential criminal violations of the Clean Water Act and a federal reporting law—said a person familiar with the investigation.

Freedom Industries said it was working with authorities. The company makes chemicals for the mining, steel and cement industries, its website said.

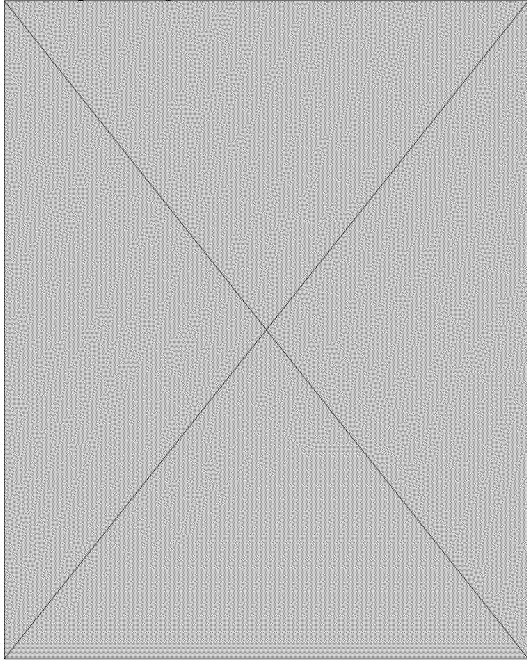
"This incident is extremely unfortunate, unanticipated and we are very sorry for the disruption to everybody's daily life," company President Gary Southern told reporters Friday evening. He said the company immediately reported the leak to the appropriate authorities when workers discovered it Thursday morning and has since moved the chemical to another location. It wasn't clear how much had escaped, he said.

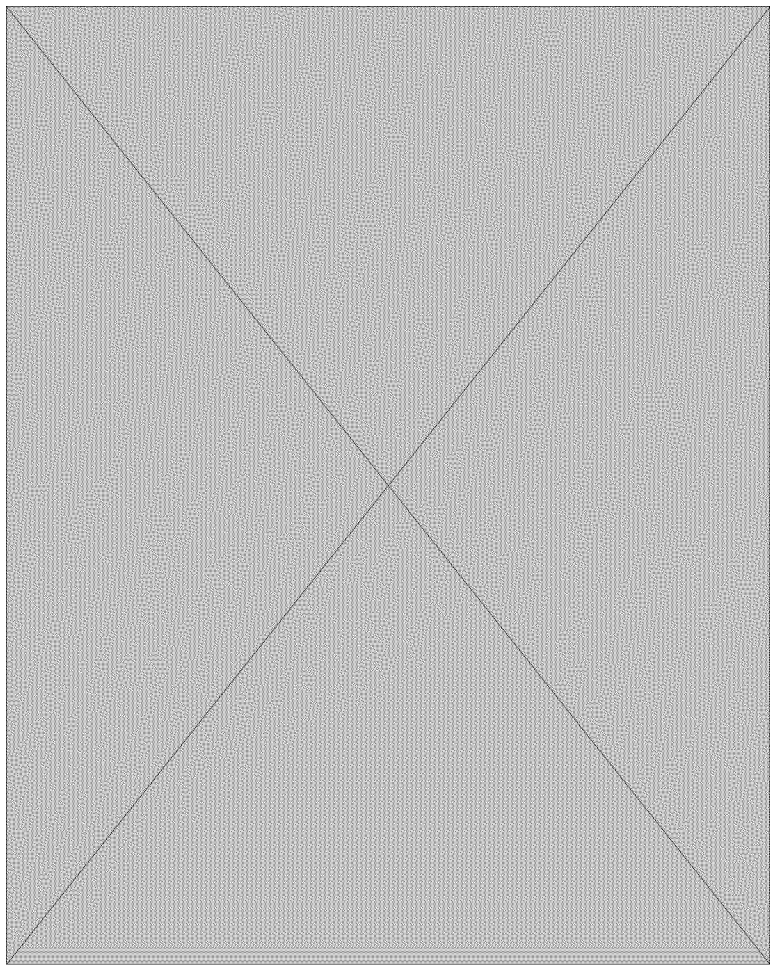
Tom Aluise, a spokesman for the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, said the agency believed no more than 5,000 gallons had spilled, but it wasn't clear how much entered the river. The agency issued an order Friday night requiring Freedom to begin moving the contents of 11 remaining above-ground storage tanks to an off-site facility with adequate containment within 24 hours.

The state agency joined the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration and others that are conducting separate investigations. OSHA and the federal Environmental Protection Agency said the firm had no past violations.

"We don't know that the water is not safe, but we can't say that it is safe," said Jeff McIntyre, president of West Virginia American Water, the company that runs the treatment plant. Roughly 187,000 customers, which includes homes, have been impacted, for a total of several hundred thousand people, according to the governor's office.

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Rafael Moure-Eraso, the chairman of the federal Chemical Safety Board, said the agency was deciding whether to investigate. He said the chemical was being stored in a tank on the side of a creek at a former oil refinery that had gone out of business.

U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin said thousands of miles of water pipes would require cleaning, taking several days for the system to return to normal.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency sent about 75 trucks to the region from Maryland carrying more than a quarter-million gallons of water.

But dozens of residents left the South Charleston Community Center frustrated Friday afternoon after learning there was no more emergency water.

Nick Woodrum, a 22-year-old call center worker, was among those who left empty-handed. He said he also checked at a Wal-Mart and gas stations. None had water. "It's starting to be like chaos around here," he said.

Many residents seeking water at centers said they also noticed the licorice smell. Several complained their nose and throats hurt. Others said the smell wasn't particularly unusual for the region, which has numerous chemical plants.

Jennifer Sayre, the Kanawha County manager, said a few people went to hospitals complaining of vomiting, burning sensations and irritation.

Mr. Aluisse, the spokesman for the state environmental department, said the spill was first noticed midday Thursday by agency inspectors responding to local complaints. Mr. McIntyre said the company discovered the chemical had reached the water distribution system after detecting a distinctive odor about 4 p.m.

MCHM is a straw-colored, greasy liquid commonly used as a solvent for lacquers, resins, oils and waxes, as well as an antioxidant for lubricants and a blending agent for special textile soaps and detergents, according to federal occupational-health documents.

Authorities on Friday gave no details about the levels of exposure people here might encounter from chemical vapors or drinking contaminated water.

Several studies show that brief exposure to low levels of the chemical appears relatively harmless. Prolonged contact can cause breathing problems and trigger headaches, according to the Handbook of Toxic and Hazardous Chemical Carcinogens. Lab experiments on animals suggest that, when injected, high levels can damage the heart, liver and kidneys.

The state Department of Education reported public schools were closed Friday across several counties.

The filing of lawsuits began at 8 a.m. Friday, with most claiming damages from the disruption to local water supplies.

"We are out of business, and it's hurting us," said Rita Stanley, manager at Capitol Car Wash in Charleston, which sued for compensation after being forced to close. At least 40 cars usually get washed a day, she said.

"Everyone is just kind of waiting," said Kizmet Chandler Rogers, a volunteer coordinating water distribution at St. Marks Episcopal Church. "They're more concerned about how long this is going to take, and if we have enough water."

—Robert Lee Hotz, Alexandra Berzon and Gerald F. Seib contributed to this article.

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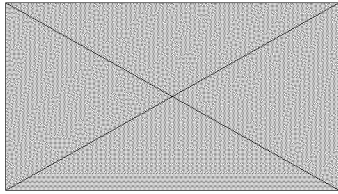
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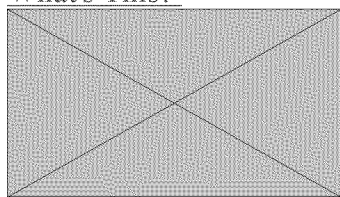
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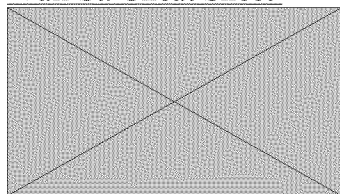
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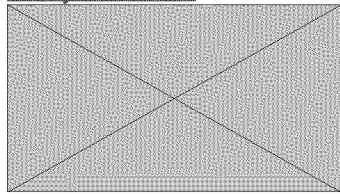
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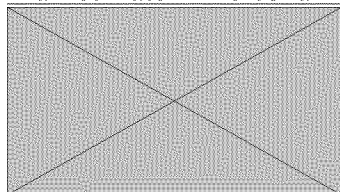
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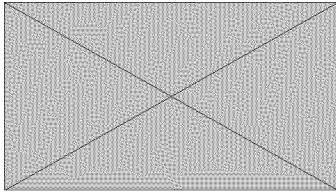
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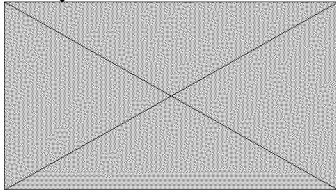


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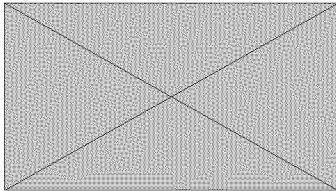
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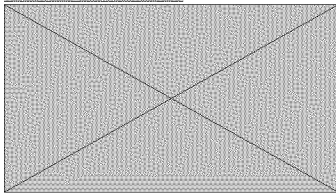
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